Doxastic Voluntarism and Religious Diversity

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ABSTRACT

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The reality of religious diversity raises questions about belief-formation, rationality, and epistemic peerhood. Doxastic voluntarism, the view that we can choose to form certain beliefs, is one proposed account of how we form beliefs in the absence of empirical evidence or conclusive reasoning, which is generally the case with religious beliefs. Direct doxastic voluntarism is the view that in some cases, we exercise immediate control over the beliefs we form. Indirect doxastic voluntarism is the view that we can only exercise control over some factors surrounding the belief-formation process but that this control nonetheless constitutes a choice of belief. I address the most common arguments for both forms of doxastic voluntarism and show that they cannot apply to religious belief. I then present three further reasons to reject doxastic voluntarism as a whole. First, neither the internalist nor the externalism conception of justification supports it as a legitimate belief-forming method. Second, it cannot account for the level of epistemic confidence we require of belief. Finally, it entails an objectionable degree of intellectual arrogance in the case of epistemic disagreement.
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Introduction

Although I am hesitant to suggest a causal relationship, a downward trend in spirituality and religious belief appears at least to correlate with an increasingly pervasive awareness and understanding of the world’s various religions. This awareness is surely due, in part, to technological advances that have rendered information both readily accessible and rapidly disseminable. The reality of religious diversity raises unavoidable questions about why equally rational people around the world believe so differently and what, if anything, makes faith in one’s own religion superior to belief in another (or in none at all).

Several theories try to account for both the definition and the epistemic justification of religious faith. I will not propose my own in this paper. For our purposes, by “faith” I will just mean belief in the existence and some particular nature of God, or some form of spiritual higher power, that is not based on empirical evidence, logical proofs, or other ordinary, rational means. This is not to say one’s religious beliefs are never formed through these other means or cannot be justified by them, but faith is the particular kind of religious belief I’m concerned with here. Frankly, I think it is the best explanation for the diversity of religious belief we encounter in the world, owing to the fact that systems of religious belief tend to provide answers to questions that, by nature, cannot be verified empirically or rationally. If they could be, I imagine it would be easy to straightforwardly evaluate all the world’s religions, and one of them would emerge as the most complete account of the truth—the obvious rational choice. But it is not obvious which religion, if any, is the most correct, and thus faith must be accounted for in some other way. We could say that faith is simply irrational, but it does not seem to be totally
arbitrary or random. Doxastic voluntarism, the view that we can choose what to believe (under certain circumstances), is one proposed solution.

The question of whether the will can enter into belief-formation is not inherently linked to religious matters. Nevertheless, it is common for proponents of doxastic voluntarism to use religious belief as the paradigmatic case, or at least a test case, of the will’s disposition to determine our beliefs in the absence of decisive evidence. In terms of appealing to how we might seem to conceive of faith, this is not, on its face, a bad theory. I think we often do tend to view having faith in the doctrines of one’s religion as a choice. However, numerous problems arise from the idea that one is at liberty to take up whatever beliefs he will simply because no evidence or counter-evidence is available.

Before exploring some of these problems, I will begin with a preliminary discussion about the state of religious diversity in the world today. I will then outline the main arguments for each of the two forms of doxastic voluntarism—direct and indirect—and show that both approaches are flawed. Finally, I will present three reasons of my own that we should reject doxastic voluntarism. The first of these is epistemic and deals with justification. It seems that whether you endorse the internalist or the externalist conception of justification, beliefs formed by way of choice cannot be justified. The second of these is also epistemic and deals with confidence. Doxastic voluntarism, it seems to me, is too weak to account for the level of epistemic confidence we tend to require of beliefs as consequential as religious ones. The third reason borders on the ethical and deals with the attitudes toward other people that result from the way we conceive of their rationality in light of our disagreement about religious truths.
Considered in conjunction, these arguments, I hope, will be sufficient to eradicate any further reasons we might have to accept doxastic voluntarism as a tenable view.
Religious Diversity

I would like to begin by presenting just a few facts about religious diversity. The purpose of listing all these statistics is not merely to point out how religious diversity varies both by location and throughout time; it is also to emphasize the sheer number of possible systems of theistic belief to which a person may subscribe and how it is not so uncommon to switch between groups. In this paper, I am concerned with why and how this switch either does or does not occur at some point in an individual’s life. We tend to view the switch from one religion to another as a choice, and rightly so. Since adopting new practices and developing habits are actions, and we have control over our actions, then to become an adherent of another religion is indeed well within the realm of one’s choice. However, I am far less certain that one chooses to adopt the beliefs that motivate such actions.

The Pew Research Center recognizes eight major religious groups in the world, listed as follows from greatest to smallest in size: Christians, Muslims, Unaffiliated, Hindus, Buddhists, Folk Religionists (including traditional African, Native American, Chinese, and Australian aboriginal religions), Other Religions (including but not limited to Sikhs, Taoists, Zoroastrians, and Wiccans), and Jews. Many of these groups can be further divided into several distinct sects. Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world, and it is projected that by 2060, Muslims could equal or surpass Christians in

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1 It is sufficient that we at least seem to have control; I will not deal with questions of freewill over actions in this particular paper. I only hope to show that questions about belief-formation are never questions of freewill (at least not any substantially similar way).
All Pew studies cited here are based on data from 2010 unless otherwise specified.
number. Perhaps contrary to what current trends seem to suggest, the Unaffiliated are expected to see the largest decrease in proportional size as a religious group.³

The Asian-Pacific region contains the greatest diversity of religions, while the Middle-East appears the least diverse. North America and Europe fall directly in the middle of this spectrum, Christianity being the largest and Unaffiliated being the second-largest group in both of these regions.⁴ The Religious Diversity Index scores the United States at 4.1 out of a possible 10, 10 indicating the greatest possible diversity.⁵

What is it about the nature of religions that causes such diversity? There are a couple of ways to determine what counts as a religion, reflected by a centuries-old divide amongst philosophers and other scholars of religion: is a religion ultimately defined by its beliefs and attitudes (i.e., faith) or by its practices (i.e., worship)?

Certainly what makes one religious group distinct from another is, at least in part, its core beliefs. We can think of these beliefs as the answers a religion provides to certain questions, similar to how one’s affiliation with a political party reflects one’s agreement with that party’s solutions to economic, social, and policy-related issues. Examples of questions we might consider particular to religious systems are: What is the nature of whatever higher spiritual power exists? What becomes of the soul after death? How can we earn salvation? Religions also provide answers to questions shared by other

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Based on data from 2015.
The highest-scoring country is Singapore at 9.0, and tied for least diverse, with an approximate score of 0.0, are Morocco, Vatican City, and an independent territory of New Zealand known as Tokelau.
disciplines, such as philosophy or science, which could include: How did the universe begin? What is the explanation for some natural phenomena? Why should we be moral? Why is there evil?

Religions and their various sects are also distinguished by the practices they prescribe. These rules for behavior may be regarded as answers to secondary questions that arise from the first kind. For example: In light of our beliefs about salvation and worthiness, what should we do? This might seem a trivial distinction, but the following question highlights its importance: Which, if either, would we say is the truer adherent to his religion: one who believes but never worships in any way or one who performs religious behaviors but has no real faith?

If your response, like mine, is that neither one is truly participating in a religion, then it would appear that neither faith nor worship is sufficient for genuine religious adherence. We ought, then, to think of a religious adherent as one whose behaviors and practices are *properly motivated* by his religious beliefs. This way, it will be clear, I hope, that I mean only to speak about a particular kind of religious adherent: one who not only actively practices his respective religion but believes in the claims, both metaphysical and ethical, that motivate those practices. Otherwise, to convert from one religion to another might merely be considered a change in behavior, and likewise, to uphold one’s own religion in the face of other options could simply be seen as carrying on with one’s current practices. I do not think this is normally the case, but even if it were, I intend to speak about what happens epistemically, not only what happens behaviorally, when one encounters other religions that conflict with one’s own.
Each time I encounter someone who answers one or more metaphysical or ethical questions differently than I do, I must affirm, if only to myself, that the answers offered by my own sect are better than those of the other. It is certainly of no small consequence to examine one’s way of thinking by continually asking oneself: Why do I believe what I believe? One might point to one’s upbringing, personal spiritual experiences, or even some form of logical reasoning to explain the religious beliefs one holds today. But when faced with the reality that people equally as rational as oneself hold beliefs vastly different from one’s own, one is forced to confront a different question: Why do I believe what I believe instead of what they believe? In other words, it is more difficult to remain as confident in one’s beliefs in light of the knowledge that another person of a conflicting faith may just as easily explain his beliefs with his own upbringing and personal experiences.

I will outline and ultimately reject one proposed solution, namely that I believe what I believe simply because I have chosen to believe it. Surely, something more is at play in the formation of religious (and all) beliefs, and what matters as a result is how we react to the reality of so many possible religions.

There are three commonly held attitudes toward the problem of conflicting religious beliefs which we might describe as religious exclusivism, religious non-exclusivism, and religious pluralism. As they enter into our discussion quite naturally, I will briefly clarify here what I mean when I use these terms. Religious exclusivism is generally taken to be the view that only one religion, or one sect of a particular religion, offers the correct position on a given truth-claim, or, in a broader sense, on all religious truth-claims. For example, someone who says “Christianity is the only true religion; all
other religions are fundamentally wrong,” would be an exclusivist. Conversely, we will take religious non-exclusivism to encompass any position denying that the perspective of one specific religion is more true than the rest. A non-exclusivist might say, “There’s no way to know if Christianity is the only true religion; who’s to say Buddhism is any less true?” Religious pluralism is similar to non-exclusivism and may be considered an expression of it. Rather than stopping at the denial of any one religion’s superiority, a religious pluralist would make an additional positive claim regarding how accurately each religion appears to represent the truth or some aspect of it. It is the pluralist who says, “All religions reflect the same divine truth, just in different ways.”

These attitudes correspond quite well to the possible attitudes toward epistemic justification in the case of peer disagreement, which I will get to later. The aim of resolving disagreement is, in principle, to determine whose belief is more justified and to adjust each peer’s level of confidence in his own belief accordingly. (The answer can, of course, be that they are equally justified, or even that neither is justified at all.) I will come back to justification, but for now I will just say that I endorse the internalist conception.

What makes religious belief different from other kinds of more mundane belief is that there is little in the way of empirical evidence to support the truth-claims of one religion above those of another. It is for this reason that figures such as William James have endorsed doxastic voluntarism; since there is no evidence strong enough to sway me in either direction, my will must decide instead which belief to take up. I hope to show that this is not how we really form beliefs at all, even about non-empirical matters such as religion.
Doxastic Voluntarism

The precise nature of belief is difficult to define and remains the subject of much debate, but for our purposes, I will adopt the view that belief is a mental attitude of acceptance toward the truth of a proposition (source). Accordingly, I will take doxastic voluntarism to be the view that we can control at least some of our own beliefs by deciding at will whether to take up an attitude of acceptance or rejection toward a given proposition.

No doxastic voluntarist affirms, or ought to affirm, that we have control over all kinds of belief, and for those over which we may have control, there are varying theories about the degree of control. William James, for example, argues that there are some beliefs over which we not only may but must exercise direct control; others deny that direct control is possible and argue instead that all we can do is indirectly influence the beliefs we form by making choices about relevant states of affairs. Either way, it is, or should be, uncontroversial that some kinds of belief are simply inaccessible to the will.

In general, these are cases in which the subject is sufficiently aware of the evidence for or against the proposition. Having seen blood, I am not at liberty to decide whether I believe that it is red in color. I may perhaps cast doubt on all my memories of blood, or on my ability to accurately recognize color, or even on the assumption that my beliefs always or usually reflect reality, but we will follow after the great skeptic Descartes himself on this matter; while I am clearly and distinctly perceiving blood, I simply do not find myself in the position to choose whether to believe, disbelieve, or withhold the belief that it is red. The same is true of propositions the belief in which we would say is justified a priori, such as valid logical inferences. These, too, are not subject
to rational doubt once I have reasoned about them, and therefore my beliefs about them are not subject to choice.

This is just to demonstrate that questions of doxastic voluntarism are the most relevant to propositions, or kinds of propositions, for which the available evidence is either insufficient to confer the confidence we usually ascribe to a belief-state or altogether impossible to attain. Propositions about religious matters are, of course, included. But does the nature of religions’ widely non-empirical justifications for their answers to metaphysical and ethical questions really leave room for choice on the part of the subject?

I will now present some common arguments for both direct and indirect doxastic voluntarism and attempt to show that no argument concluding that choosing our beliefs is either what we actually do or what we ought to do is convincing.

**Direct Doxastic Voluntarism**

By far the most prominent proponent of direct doxastic voluntarism is William James, to whom I have only alluded so far but whose theory I will now address. In “The Will To Believe,” James famously classifies the decisions we make regarding propositions about which we have not yet formed beliefs (hypotheses) in three ways.\(^6\) These decisions, or options, must be either: (1) living (\(i.e.,\) that one hypothesis might be true and that another conflicting hypothesis might be true seem about equally possible to the subject) or dead (it would be virtually impossible for the subject to regard one of two conflicting hypotheses as a real probability), (2) forced or avoidable, and (3) momentous

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or trivial. If an option is live, forced, and momentous, then we regard it as a genuine option, which is to say that the subject has both the ability and the obligation to arrive at a belief on the matter. Like I have set out to do in this paper, James uses religious belief as the primary test case for his theory. Despite the fact that no empirical evidence is conclusive enough to settle non-controversially one’s beliefs about the existence and nature of God, it is both difficult and discouraged to indefinitely withhold belief on the matter. The same might be said of any non-empirical, or unverifiable,7 beliefs, such as moral beliefs. Tempting though it may be to remain skeptical when engaging in the risky business of deriving oughts from is statements, the stakes are too high; we simply must decide on some position or other. It is interesting to note that the least verifiable propositions also seem to be the most momentous, seeing as how religious and ethical beliefs often motivate the subject’s weightiest life choices.

Now, one could make the case that there is room for uncertainty, and therefore room to assert the will, about any hypothesis so long as conclusive evidence is not immediately accessible to the subject. Such a broad form of skepticism would encompass not only all unverifiable propositions but all unverified ones. For example, all scientific claims which the subject has not come to believe via firsthand experimentation would be subject to the same fundamental uncertainty as claims about the immaterial and otherwise metaphysically inaccessible entities and states of affairs which constitute religious and ethical systems of belief. But because the theories produced by science often offer answers to our persistent curiosities about the world, we do what we can and decide to trust the accounts given in our science textbooks. Historical claims also require some

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7 I do not mean to align myself with logical positivist movement and its many mistaken conclusions; here I am merely using “unverifiable” as a synonym for “non-empirical.”
arbitration on our part. Until time travel finally comes around, I am in no position to verify for myself that a man called Socrates really drank hemlock in 399 B.C.E. or that Napoleon met his defeat at Waterloo. So, if I am to form any beliefs at all about past events, I must, to some extent, exercise my will in determining on what grounds I will accept or reject a given claim.

It may well be said that much of our scientific and historical knowledge is grounded in trust of scientists and historians and is therefore nothing more than a paradigm of belief from testimony. I would like to set aside these kinds of beliefs for the remainder of our discussion, for although they are anything but trivial, what distinguishes such claims from the religious or ethical is that, especially in the case of science, one could verify them given the proper tools for demonstration. Of course, this might be thought true for religious beliefs as well; given the proper level of consciousness or even certain physical tools described by various books of scripture to aid the adherent in gaining spiritual knowledge. James’s point is just that when no such tools are readily available or even logically possible, in the case of a genuine option, something other than the intellect must bridge the gap between hypothesis and belief, and, according to James, this is the will.

I confess myself convinced, at least in part, by James’s argument that the intellect need not be the only faculty we possess that aims at truth or at least produces belief, summed as follows:

If the hypothesis [that we take some things on faith and not reason] were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required. I, therefore, for one cannot see my way to
accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing
nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking
which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if
those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.⁸

But why think that this other truth-seeking faculty is the will? James does not give much
of an argument here other than that “pure insight and logic, whatever they might do
ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds”⁹ and that “as a matter of
fact...we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions [and] there are some
options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable
and as a lawful determinant of our choice.”¹⁰

But if a belief (or opinion) is arrived at by means of our “passional nature,” I am
hesitant to call it a belief at all. To me, it appears to be more like a product of wishful
thinking at best and of self-deception at worst. Wishful thinking can be conceived as the
result of a conflict between what one does believe and what one desires to believe, which
takes the form of a more or less imagined justification of that which would be pleasing to
believe. I fail to see much of a difference between wishful thinking and “our passional
nature influencing us in our opinions.” Furthermore, I do not take any conclusion reached
via wishful thinking to be a belief at all. If, as I stated, belief is a mental state of
acceptance of a proposition, then even if I am right that is not the kind of mental state that
can be taken up at will, there are still other kinds of mental states that we can take up at
will, and perhaps there are even kinds that can come about either way. Hope, I think, is
one of the kind that we can take up at will and is perhaps the state produced by wishful

⁸ James 28-29.
⁹ Ibid. 11.
¹⁰ Ibid. 19
thinking. Memory might be a mental state that either the will or external stimuli can cause to arise.

I also think that whether a mental attitude can or cannot be taken up at will is not the only factor relevant to our discussion. It is also worth saying that some mental attitudes can also be terminated at will. Hope, actively recalling a memory, and perhaps fear and other emotions may all qualify as this kind of mental state. But just as we cannot take up just any beliefs at will, I do not think we are any better equipped to abandon them at will, either.

I would like to present crises of faith as a counterexample to James’ claim that we are even capable of believing everything was want to believe (granted that there is no sufficient evidence favoring either option). Sometimes, an adherent of a particular religion finds that he is no longer able to accept the truths proposed by that faith. Such a realization is often devastating, which is exactly why many call it a crisis. The initial cause of such a crisis is normally that the subject gains awareness of evidence against the truth his religion, whether it be one particular contradictory point of doctrine, an official policy with which the subject disagrees, or the discovery of unsavory truths about the very origins of the religion itself. It can, however, also simply be an increased understanding of another religion that conflicts with one’s own. In either case, whether the evidence contradicts one’s own religion or is merely ambiguous, a faith crisis may compel the subject to question virtually everything else taught by his religion. It is not impossible for the subject to emerge from his crisis with renewed faith, strengthened in any number of ways ranging from personal spiritual experiences to helpful advice from fellow members of that religion. However, many times, the subject finds that the secure
foundation that once supported his entire worldview and justified his moral beliefs and practices gives way under the mounting weight of such inescapable doubts.

In many cases, the sad reality is that it would be much easier if the subject could choose to continue believing as he had before the crisis; it is what the subject desires. Atheism, and sometimes the practice of a religion other than that which is sanctioned by the state, is punishable by death in thirteen countries today, so the incentive to believe may be overwhelming.\textsuperscript{11} In other places, the result of losing one’s faith may not be quite so severe, but the pressure to believe is just as present due to other undesirable outcomes like social ostracism, loss of connection with one’s peers, or familial threats of disownment. But despite these and other very real consequences, try as he might, the subject must often accept that he simply cannot return to the state of belief he previously held. The will is sometimes powerless to help the sufferer of the faith crisis, for even though the claims made by the religion were unverifiable in the first place, he has now come across other claims which, whether they themselves are verifiable or not, conflict so loudly with his own religion that he is forced to lose confidence in it.

In summary, I think it is clear that direct doxastic voluntarism is a very difficult position to defend. I have tried to show that either we cannot take up an attitude of acceptance at will or the attitudes we do take up at will are not beliefs. Whichever of these is true, whether it be one or both, the subject alone does not possess the power to fashion his desires into legitimate beliefs. Alston\textsuperscript{12} gives what I think is the most accurate account of what really happens when one seems to make a choice:

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In the cases of (subjective) certainty belief is determined by that sense of certainty, or, alternatively, by what leads to it, the sensory experience or whatever; in the cases of (subjective) uncertainty belief is still determined by what plays an analogous role, the sense that one alternative is more likely than the others, or by what leads to that. Thus when our philosopher or religious seeker “decides” to embrace theism or the identity theory, what has happened is that at that moment this position seems more likely to be true, seems to have weightier considerations in its favor, than any envisaged alternative. Hence S is, at that moment, no more able to accept atheism or epiphenomenalism instead, than he would be if theism or the identity theory seemed obviously and indubitably true.\textsuperscript{13}

I think James is absolutely correct that one’s religious beliefs are of great consequence; it is a momentous option. In addition, he is probably right that most of us feel that we cannot put off settling our beliefs about religious matters forever; it is a forced option. However, I simply cannot agree that the way we settle on a belief or system of beliefs is by deciding to accept one out of all that are possible. That just isn’t how we talk about belief.

Even in the moments when it seems like a matter of choice, I do not even think James would say it must be totally arbitrary. There is always some epistemic or evidentiary reason motivating the subject to make the particular choice he does, which is to say that it seems to be the closest to the truth, or seems to at least have the strongest justification; otherwise, he would have chosen something else. Direct voluntarists like James have their hearts in the right place, to be sure; direct doxastic voluntarism appears to explain why choosing to have faith is necessary at times and why beliefs based on faith

\textsuperscript{13} Alston 125.
are not to be taken any less seriously than beliefs fully ratified by the intellect. But it appears to me that the real issue surrounding the conception of faith as a choice is how we bridge the gap between uncertainty and confidence to (choose to) act in faith, and direct control of belief is not the answer.

**Indirect Doxastic Voluntarism**

It may still be possible, however, that we can indirectly influence our beliefs. If direct doxastic voluntarism is the view that we can immediately choose our attitudes towards some kinds of propositions, indirect doxastic voluntarism is the view that although we cannot choose our beliefs in *that* way, we can control *some* factors surrounding the belief-formation process that, in turn, directly influence our beliefs. Indirect doxastic voluntarism is generally argued for in two possible ways. The first is that we can control the evidence for a given proposition to some extent, and since that evidence the cause of at least some of our beliefs, we have indirectly chosen those beliefs. This will prove to be unworkable in the case of religious belief, but I shall briefly lay out the argument nonetheless. The second argument, which is perhaps the strongest case for indirect doxastic voluntarism, is that we can control the extent to which we are exposed to confirming or disconfirming evidence about propositions. So, theoretically, if I look for evidence in favor of something I want to be true, or if I avoid evidence against it, I have effectively chosen to believe it. I will try to show that this, too, is not sufficient for genuine choice of a given belief.

Let us first consider a simple example of the first case, the argument from control of the evidence. Suppose the light in my room is turned off, but I want to believe that it is on. Try as I might, I cannot will myself to believe that the bulb is giving off light when it
is clearly doing no such thing. Not to worry, though; the solution is well within my reach. I flip the lightswitch from off to on, the bulb lights up, and I now hold the true belief that the light is on. It does seem right to say that I exercised some form of immediate control over my belief, effectively causing the proposition “the light is on” to become true.

Alston gives us good reason to deny that such examples illustrate that indirect control always constitutes a choice. He observes that undertaking an action for the purpose of bringing about some certain, guaranteed effect is notably different from undertaking an action which could result in any number of effects (within a particular scope). We are more comfortable saying that the agent controlled the effect of his action in the former case than in the latter.

Besides, let us imagine applying this simple example of control to a belief within the domain of religion. Does any religious adherent or indirect doxastic voluntarist really think that we mere mortals have any mode of control whatsoever available to us through which to affect the metaphysical state of the divine or to rewrite absolute moral truths? Weak would be the god able to be created and modified at will by his subjects, made in their image. Whatever is true about the origin of the universe, whether it be the Big Bang or that it was created *ex nihilo* by a divine being or that it has always existed, not one person alive today or at any time has yet been granted the ability to change what actually happened. Clearly, the argument from control of one’s environment is not one that can account for religious belief.

Proponents of indirect doxastic voluntarism who do not argue from control will argue instead that because it is in my power to discover confirming evidence, and awareness of that evidence will affect my belief, it is therefore in my power to choose
that belief. So, the question becomes that of whether choosing to seek out confirming evidence is equivalent to choosing to believe what the evidence confirms.

But the principle still holds true that whether I have chosen something depends on whether I set out with the goal of bringing about that specific thing. So, likewise with belief; I am in agreement with Alston that I have chosen a belief only if I somehow knew beforehand that the evidence I found would lead me to that very belief. If I did not already have that belief in mind, then not only have I not chosen it; I could not have chosen it. What I have actually chosen is to carry out the process of investigation until I the evidence I encounter inspires sufficient confidence in some belief or other.

Tännsjö\(^1\) presents two possible accounts of responsibility\(^2\) for the consequence \(c\) of an action \(a\): that \(c\) following \(a\) is a sufficient condition for my responsibility (the closed view), or that \(c\) following \(a\) is a necessary condition for my responsibility (the open view). If \(a\) is the effort to take up a particular belief and \(c\) is the actual inception of that belief, one would think the closed view makes more sense. Even if I think it is likely, because there is no guarantee that my investigation will yield the belief I have in mind (as undertaking an investigation implies I do not know one way or the other), the belief’s inception cannot be a necessary condition for my responsibility. Therefore, the open view does not apply to belief-formation.

But the belief’s inception is not sufficient to show that I am responsible either, because my believing that an earnest investigation would yield a certain belief is all but


\(^{15}\) “Responsibility” carries an ethical connotation, but I am not attempting to establish an ethics of belief. The relevant feature of this theory is the notion of consequence. I will just use “responsibility” to mean being the cause of the consequence.
to hold that belief already, subjecting any evidence I find to criticism on the basis of confirmation bias. Seeking to become more confident in what I already believe or want to believe is not the same as coming to believe it, let alone choosing to believe it, in the first place. So, the closed view of responsibility cannot apply to belief-formation because if I already had the belief in mind, then we cannot even say that \( c \) followed \( a \).

And if the evidence disconfirms what I expected to be true, have I then \textit{chosen} to believe its opposite? No; in fact, I would think this could not be further from the truth. One would have to have a strange notion of choice in order to think I could choose something that I myself did not even think \textit{could} be chosen. Rather, it seems much more reasonable to say that my newfound attitude of rejection toward the original proposition is nothing but an inevitable consequence of my investigation. This occurrence is, in fact, one of the most common instances of the inception of a faith crisis, over which I have already stressed the impotence of the will.

In conclusion, for indirect voluntarism to be true, we must be able to exercise control in some relevant way over the beliefs we come to hold. Hypothetically, this can be achieved in a couple of ways. The first way, which is to exercise control over evidence so that one’s beliefs change accordingly, is inapplicable to religious beliefs. The second way is to exercise control over the extent to which one is exposed to relevant evidence, which I have also rejected. So, like direct doxastic voluntarism, indirect doxastic voluntarism cannot be true of religious belief. I will grant that perhaps in non-religious cases, the will may figure in somehow (though not, I think, in the relevant way). However, because of the nature of religious beliefs, we cannot create or control the
relevant decisive evidence, *nor* can we choose to become aware of it. Ultimately, both approaches to doxastic voluntarism fail.
Justification, Confidence, and Attitudes

Should the reader remain sympathetic towards the doxastic voluntarist view, I will now present three further reasons for rejecting it. First, I will establish that neither the externalist nor the internalist conception of is conducive to doxastic voluntarism’s defensibility in the case of faith. Then, I will aim to show that doxastic voluntarism entails a kind of contradiction regarding justification and epistemic confidence. Finally, I will explore some implications about disagreement and the attitudes that can result from how we explain it.

Externalism and Internalism

Though I have not yet made it explicit, it may be clear enough from the priority I have placed on evidence (and the lack thereof) that I generally endorse the internalist conception of justification. I take epistemic internalism to be the view that a person is justified in a belief \( b \) only if his confidence in \( b \) is proportional to his own awareness of the evidence in favor of \( b \).\(^{16}\) So, in theory, religious beliefs would only be justified if there were sufficient evidence in their favor.

It is not necessarily obvious, though, that this is how we actually justify religious faith. An externalist conception of justification, like that of Plantinga,\(^ {17}\) for example, requires only that the subject’s belief-forming processes be reliable, functioning properly, operating in the proper environment, aiming at truth, and so forth; the subject’s awareness and other internal mental states do not confer justification. Since there is arguably no empirical evidence conclusively favoring the beliefs of one religion over

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those of another anyway, it is not difficult to see the appeal in relying on the way(s) in which the beliefs are formed instead.

Let us suppose that externalism conception is the better account of how we justify religious faith. What would be the belief-forming process at play? Most often, I think, one is brought up to practice the same religion as one’s family, taking the truth of its doctrines on the testimony of his parents, whom he regards as having good authority, until he is old enough to observe for himself why they are true. This observation can take various forms, of which perhaps the most commonly reported is a feeling of spiritual confirmation. This is called by some the sensus divinitatis, after Calvin. So, insofar as one’s sensus divinitatis functions properly (and meets the various other externalist criteria), he is justified in the religious beliefs that arise from his experiences with it.

There are some clear problems with this view. First, due to its subjective nature, there is no way to compare how the sensus divinitatis operates for different people. Additionally, because there is little to no external evidence to corroborate beliefs about the divine that arise from this sense, there is no way to measure how well it functions even on the subjective level. The only plausible way to assess the proper functioning of one’s own sensus divinitatis would be to compare the beliefs it causes in one person with those it causes in others. The more people that report forming the same particular belief via sensus divinitatis, and the greater the number of these beliefs, the more certain each person can be that his sensus is functioning properly. However, as I emphasized earlier, it is clearly not the case that all or even most people arrive at the same religious beliefs from spiritual experiences.
Lest the reader take this to be an argument against the concept of a sensus divinitatis rather than against externalism, I would venture that the same can be said of virtually any belief-forming process. For every Christian theologian who produces a logical argument concluding that Christianity must be the only true and complete religious position, there is a Muslim who reasons in the same way about his own position, and a Buddhist, and an atheist. A Catholic expects and may even encourage children raised in Catholic households to adopt their parents’ beliefs, but he has no grounds on which to assert that Jewish children who likewise trust the testimonies of their own parents are any less justified. No one can deny that the same belief-forming processes can and do produce conflicting beliefs that are nonetheless equally justified.

How, then, is the externalist account sufficient to defeat the special problems posed by religious diversity? We cannot simply say, “The Jew was just raised in an environment which made it seem as though only the Jewish faith could be true, and so his belief-forming faculties were not operating in the correct environment, and so his beliefs are not justified,” or, “That Hindu just has a malfunctioning sensus divinitatus, and he can never gain full and correct awareness of God the way I can,” for to say such things is to exhibit an objectionable degree of ignorance, prejudice, and intellectual arrogance. It is also and perhaps especially to deny that those mentioned are the speaker’s epistemic peers, so on the whole, arguments like these do nothing to help our discussion.

At any rate, I do not think any externalist theory would include the process of choosing one’s beliefs among those processes that do confer justification, even if it so happens that the subject tends to choose religious beliefs that turn out to be true most of the time (even supposing that we could somehow verify this). Any discussion of doxastic
voluntarism, especially in a religious context, must necessarily be tethered in some way or another to the way things appear to the subject (i.e., the evidence available to him).

And it is true that the internalist conception of justification appeals to what I think ought to characterize the way we generally form and defend our beliefs: whether or not I am aware of conflicting evidence, if I truly believe something, I should be able to explain why if called upon to do so. The externalist view suggests that we must take no argument or demonstration into account when appraising the justification of a religious (or any) belief; we must rely instead on the proper functioning of the cognitive processes that bring about those beliefs. So, as Julian Willard\textsuperscript{18} notes, “[these cognitive processes] can only be of a sort that does not appeal to our faculty (or faculties) of reason, since otherwise we would be in the domain of epistemological internalism.”\textsuperscript{19} As I stated at the beginning of the paper, it is true that some religious beliefs are formed in those rational ways, but the experiences and reasons—in other words, evidence—available to our minds, are not the grounds for religious faith. So, although I think internalism to be more capable of explaining most kinds of beliefs, even including some religious beliefs, both internalism and externalism are unable to satisfactorily account for faith.

\textit{Proportional Confidence}

In fact, I will now expose a contradiction that follows from doxastic voluntarism. As previously established, the strongest argument in favor of doxastic voluntarism in any form rests on the premise that the available evidence in favor of a belief and/or against its alternative(s) is inconclusive, which is also, by definition, requisite for faith. But think


\textsuperscript{19} Willard 286.
about what it means for the very basis of the position to be that the available evidence is insufficient to confer belief. However you choose to proceed, it seems that any belief one forms in the face of insufficient evidence must necessarily be less justified than a belief one forms on the basis of decisive evidence. The very act of choosing a belief ought to make one markedly less confident in that belief, knowing that one was only free to choose it in the first place because the evidence was not strong enough to decide for him.

Nevertheless, religious adherents often regard the choice to believe in one’s religion despite the lack of empirical evidence as noble, worthy, an act of faith. This, I think, is at least partly due to the fact that all kinds of future decisions and actions will follow from that choice. In fact, it seems to me that we often stake our *most important* decisions, actions, habits, plans, hopes, fears, and so on, on our religious beliefs as if they are the *most certain* beliefs we have.

It is even common to stake other beliefs on our religious beliefs. Plenty of religious adherents reject scientific theories like evolution in this way. Still, this is not to say that they choose these other beliefs. Once one has “chosen” to believe in a certain religion, I would think that from that moment forward, he takes any relevant principles of that religion as evidence or relevant prior knowledge when weighing the considerations for and against another truth-claim; he would not be making the original choice each time. But the point is that whether belief is ultimately a choice or not, there is no denying that a true religious adherent’s beliefs are greatly consequential in virtually all areas of his or her life.

It is precisely because these kinds of beliefs bear so powerfully on the believer’s life that I am inclined to say they cannot have been chosen. Since choice presupposes
inconclusive evidence, it cannot be what confers the confidence necessary to act
according to the teachings of one’s religion. In other words, if a belief is chosen, then, by
its nature, it is less justified than a belief ought to be which motivates the level of
devotion typical of religious adherents. The stakes being so high, it must be that
something else, some other aspect of belief-formation, makes us sufficiently confident.
And if there is something else that justifies that level of confidence, there is no room for
choice. To summarize, it is in the only cases in which doxastic voluntarism even has the
chance to account for what faith means that it cannot do so.

Disagreement

Switching gears, I would now like to present my final argument against doxastic
voluntarism, in which I take issue with the implications of framing faith in this way rather
than any preclusive considerations of validity and soundness. When two equally rational
people, or peers, disagree about the truth of some proposition, each is forced to respond
in some way. Generally, this takes the form of an attitude about either one’s own
justification and confidence or the other’s. I will try to show that if you conceptualize
faith as a choice, it is much easier to fall victim to the intellectual arrogance of our
externalist. Some attitudes are preferable to others due to the way they engender
intellectual humility. I will explain more through this discussion of epistemic
disagreement.

Two people are considered epistemic peers if they can be said to approach the
proposed belief from the same epistemic position. One’s position is determined by a
number of factors, such as cognitive/intellectual ability, the amount of evidence
immediately available, relevant prior knowledge, time spent thinking about the issue, and
so forth. There is some dispute about how many of these factors must be equal between two people in order for us to consider them peers, but usually “most” is a sufficient answer; rarely does a philosopher hold that two people must be equal on all of them in order to be peers. Although information about other systems of belief is more easily available now than it has ever been, it is likely that in almost every case, someone who is raised in the Buddhist faith will have at least a little more relevant prior knowledge or time spent thinking about the issue than someone raised as a Catholic who later learns about Buddhism. Still, if the two are equal on most other grounds, we can call them peers.

Several criteria can aid in evaluating a disagreement, including the self-consistency, comprehensiveness, etc. of each peer’s belief. More generally, the relationship between each peer’s belief and the available evidence must be of a certain quality. If it becomes clear that one peer has failed to reason well, the disagreement is settled; the peer who is less justified then loses confidence in his belief and gains confidence in his peer’s. But if they are indeed on equal ground, there must be some other way to respond to the discrepancy in their beliefs.

Doxastic voluntarism purports to prove that this gap between epistemic peerhood and disagreement on religious matters must be explained by choice; one peer chose to put his faith in one religion while the other chose to put his faith in another, so each is equally justified and may therefore be equally confident in his own religious beliefs. I have explained already why doxastic voluntarism is not sufficient to fill this particular gap, but it remains true that disagreement can lead to reduced confidence. However, the

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20 Peterson et. al. 2013, pp. 69-74.
gap between disagreement and confidence also need not be explained by choice. Per the
previous section, religious adherents exhibit a level of confidence in their beliefs that
choice simply cannot confer.

One such belief maintained by plenty of religious adherents with the same
confidence is the attitude of religious exclusivism. To demonstrate the point, a
conversation with an exclusivist might go as follows:

“I know that my religion is the only true one!”

“Really? How do you know that?”

“Well, due to religious experiences I’ve had and how it just makes sense to me, I
just know.”

“But couldn’t someone else believe their religion is the only true one for the same
reasons?”

(Luckily, our exclusivist grants that those who believe differently are still his
peers, so we need not suffer any of the prejudiced responses exemplified earlier.
Instead…)

“Well, ultimately, it’s part of what my religion teaches, so I choose to have faith.”

“So you choose to believe that your religion is the only true one?”

“I guess that’s right.”

“Then how can you be so confident, knowing you could’ve chosen differently?
And that still doesn’t explain why you’d think someone else who chooses to believe their
religion is the only true one is just wrong.”

And so we are brought back to the very question driving this paper.
The true issue lies in the way epistemic attitudes toward peer disagreement appear to correspond with attitudes toward religious diversity, since religious diversity is essentially an instance of disagreement on the global scale. *Uniqueness* is one proposed attitude toward disagreement and entails that if the two peers truly are in the same epistemic position, then only one possible belief can be justified, or the most justified, given the evidence. If one peer reaches a belief other than that particular one, then his confidence should be significantly reduced when he discovers that his peers reached a different one. On the contrary, *permissiveness* is the view that if the two peers are equally rational and given the same evidence, they are nonetheless equally justified if they arrive at different, even conflicting, conclusions; neither peer need lose confidence in his own belief.

At first glance, uniqueness and exclusivism seem to go hand in hand since each points to one correct position, and likewise with permissiveness and non-exclusivism or pluralism, since each is more accepting of equal yet different positions. But there is a key difference between these kinds of attitudes. Uniqueness and permissiveness are ways of approaching epistemic justification. Exclusivism and non-exclusivism, though, express attitudes not about justification but about truth itself. So, even though uniqueness and permissiveness are mutually exclusive, as are exclusiveness and non-exclusiveness, we need not think that uniqueness precludes pluralism or that permissiveness requires it. As a matter of fact, with a little more discussion, I aim to prove that a permissive approach to justification is the only acceptable way to maintain religious exclusivism, especially since doxastic voluntarism is untenable.
As I have tried to demonstrate at length, there is no straightforward way to settle disagreement about religious beliefs in particular, owing to the lack of relevant empirical evidence and our resultant inability to determine whose belief is more consistent with and comprehensive of the metaphysical truth of the divine. It is for this reason that I find a permissive approach to be much more tenable than uniqueness in the case of religious diversity. To say that only one system of belief can ultimately be justified does not seem fair at all.

In fact, I do not think it would be fair to say even if one religious system is actually completely true. Even if I believe that persons belonging to my own religion may be granted privileged access to the knowledge that it is true, I cannot expect each and every one of my epistemic peers on Earth to believe so as confidently as I do (or at all). Returning to my earlier examples of intellectual arrogance, it is clear that such responses are only necessarily characteristic of epistemic uniqueness and not always of religious exclusivism. It appears difficult to escape the charge of self-righteousness when one maintains uniqueness in the face of religious diversity. It is essentially to say, “We may or may not know which religion is really true, but based on what we do know, any beliefs different from mine cannot be justified. No exceptions.” This attitude leaves especially little room for doxastic voluntarism, which would require at least a little epistemic uncertainty.

Permissiveness, on the other hand, embodies just the right degree of open-mindedness and intellectual humility to respectfully allow for any attitude toward religious diversity. Exclusivists and pluralists alike should agree about justification even if they disagree about truth. Someone who is both permissive and a pluralist might say,
“Since people can be equally justified in religious beliefs that contradict my own, maybe all the other religions do capture as much divine truth as my own.” But even if we reject the pluralist’s claim about truth, it is just as possible to be both permissive and an exclusivist. As a matter of fact, it seems to me that this is actually the stance taken by many, if not most, religious adherents, whether consciously or not. After all, it is really just to say, “I firmly believe my religion to be the only correct one, but since other people, like myself, couldn’t have chosen to believe differently than they do, and since there is no way to settle our conflicting beliefs, I can grant that they are nonetheless as justified in their beliefs as I am in mine.” A Christian can look at a Buddhist and accept that since neither of the two has chosen his beliefs, but each has faith, the Buddhist is just as rational; there is no intellectually humble way to accept at the same time that he is more justified.

In the end, especially if we accept that our beliefs are more or less beyond our control, permissive exclusivism is a more attractive and, frankly, a more honest position than exclusivism paired with uniqueness. After all, who really means to say, “Not only do I know my religion is better than all the rest; we’re also the only ones justified in thinking that!” I have encountered only a few so doubly closed-minded.
Conclusion

Each religious adherent must regularly exercise faith in a variety of circumstances, not the least of which involve beliefs about the nature of the divine and one’s relationship to it. Such beliefs include but are not limited to the fate of the soul in the life to come, the confidence that one will be protected and provided for in this life, and the notion that one has done the right thing. Though unverifiable, the beliefs offered by religious institutions are nonetheless precious to the believer, as they manifest an often unmatched capacity to inspire hope, strengthen resolve, and bring peace and happiness during times of hardship.

But whether you are an internalist or an externalist with regard to epistemic justification, whether you take uniqueness or permissiveness to be the better approach to disagreement, and whether you endorse religious exclusivism, non-exclusivism, or pluralism, there is no good reason to accept that choice over one’s own beliefs, whether applied directly or indirectly, is ever necessary to account for the variety of conflicting faiths we encounter in the world. If the evidence in favor of a given claim available to the subject is decisive enough to warrant faith, then there is no room for choice; if the evidence is so inconclusive that the subject can only settle the matter by means of a decision, then the resulting attitude toward the claim is not belief. Since we have defined faith as belief, the resulting attitude likewise cannot be faith.

It may stand to reason that another definition of faith could have affected our discussion. Faith could also be seen as a kind of commitment to act according to the tenets of a religion as if they were certainly true. Since action does fall under the jurisdiction of the will, faith can indeed be voluntarily chosen in this sense. But insofar as
faith is a kind of belief, it is not something chosen. If I am to accept a certain belief, but no means exist to rationally compel me to, faith is the only option left, and a choice must be between at least two options; it is all we can have.

By conceptualizing belief as a choice, it is also much easier for one to feel that the other person could choose to believe in one’s own religion instead of the other’s and therefore, the other is being irrational by resisting. One could also perhaps think that faith can be a chosen, but isn’t necessarily always, and that those beliefs that are chosen are less justified than those that aren’t, so whereas people of other religions are in a position to have to choose, one’s own beliefs are more justified since he didn’t have to choose, and additionally others could just be choosing to ignore the truth (which is found in your own religion). So if none of the previous arguments have been convincing, we should also reject doxastic voluntarism as an account of how we form beliefs because it ultimately does not seem to lead to any really constructive or honest beliefs about justification or equal rationality.
Works Cited


